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RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 3607
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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: LAWLESSNESS AND LYNCHINGS

Classified By: A/DCM Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4b,d

1. (SBU) Summary: Recent actions of the ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party to block opposition congress members from entering Congress, thus allowing MAS bills to pass uncontested, come at a time when Bolivians are worried over what seems to be an increasing sense of lawlessness in the country. In Potosi, shoppers frustrated by rising food prices recently sacked part of a central market. The torture and murder of three allegedly-corrupt police officers on February 27, at the hands of a crowd claiming membership in the MAS, has drawn attention to question of "community justice" (as murders by enraged crowds are mistakenly termed.) In the first two months of 2008, the police report 11 fatal lynchings and 29 attempted lynchings, while in the entire year of 2007 the numbers were 16 lynchings and 57 attempts. Thus the first two months of 2008 have already seen more than half the lynchings of the year before. Many of these killings are made more reprehensible by torture and later revelations of mistaken identity. End summary.

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Lynching: Continuation of Politics by Other Means?
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2. (C) Some analysts and political commentators blame the increase in lynchings on a new culture of political fanaticism. Peasant leader Rufo Calle stated publicly that "they have confused ideology with fanaticism...our brothers are manipulated by political parties...we are in a country without law." El Alto councilmember Roberto De la Cruz announced that "some comrades are living in a moment of political fanaticism because they have a popular President and they feel they can do what they want without consequences." (Note: in an interview with the Washington Post in February 2008, De la Cruz described the October 2003 riots that caused ex-president Goni Sanchez de Lozada's resignation as community justice: "That was communal justice, because Goni was expelled from the community -- from all of Bolivia. Whatever person does something like that, then the same thing could happen to them." De la Cruz was also, as interim mayor, filmed by Bolivian television network

Unitel among the crowd that was preparing to lynch an alleged thief in April 2007 before police intervened. End note.) Journalists at the scene of the lynching of the three policemen in Cochabamba reported that the crowd shouted "we're MASistas and now we have the power." The journalists (who were also roughed up by the crowd) added that the victims claimed membership in the MAS, too, but to no avail. According to news reports, the crowd was called together by a community leader using the MAS-financed community (indigenous language) radio station.

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Indefensible but Understandable
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13. (SBU) Law enforcement and the justice system have long been absent in large parts of the country, particularly in the countryside and inner cities. Frustration at the lack of legal recourse and rising crime rates have led communities to take "justice" into their own hands. Many of the attempted and successful lynchings are tied to alleged robberies: telephone and electrical poles in El Alto are often decorated with hanged effigies, a warning to potential thieves. Recent attempted lynchings in El Alto have involved alleged thieves "caught in the act", surrounded, and beaten or burned.

14. (C) Some observers have suggested to Emboffs that the high rate of attempted lynchings in Santa Cruz (9 of the 11 deaths in 2008 occurred in Santa Cruz) can be tied to the fact that the police forces have been isolated by both the central government and local governments: the central government questions the loyalty of police officers in opposition regions, while the local governments are unwilling to fund the police until they "wear our uniform." Nationwide, the police are generally underpaid and poorly supported: a police commander in rural Potosi recently asked Emboffs if the Embassy could donate a used computer, since the town's police force had no equipment beyond their own personal cellphones. Similarly, National Police authorities have told us that they lack radio communication and thus are unable to respond to crimes or lynchings in progress. Making the situation worse, the National Police (there are no local police forces) is currently demanding a salary increase, and security guards in Santa Cruz are publicly threatening to riot.

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We Hate You, Now Help Us
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15. (SBU) Although police corruption is rampant in Bolivia, the police are also often caught in a Catch-22 situation. For example, on March 3 police in Chochabamba (near the town where 3 officers had been killed just days before) were attacked and, in one case, doused with gasoline by the passengers of a car that had been pulled over for drunk driving. A day later, police and emergency responders were hassled for their late arrival at the scene of an alleged crime. After blaming the police for the victim's death, the crowd reportedly cried, "How are you going to help us if you can't save your colleagues from being burned? Get out of here!"

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Drugs Don't Help
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16. (C) Residents of the community where the three policemen were lynched allege another reason for minimal police enforcement: corruption due to drug trafficking. Residents told the media, "Lots of times we see that the police pull over suspect vehicles, but then they negotiate with the bad guys and let them go." Bolivia's coca-producing areas certainly present an opportunity for corruption: limited control or backup for officers and lots of money. The police in turn point to what they characterize as limited payoff for their enforcement efforts: "Delinquents quickly get out of jail, and there's no other punishment...so after a short time they're free again and go back to committing crimes," said

Colonel Adolfo Espinoza, national director of the Special Force in the Fight Against Crime (FELCC).

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Torture and Murder: Church and Government Oppose
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¶7. (SBU) The head of the Catholic Church in Bolivia, Cardinal Julio Terrazas, spoke out against lynchings on March 1, and the government has stated that it will issue a decree against lynching. Since murder is already outlawed in Bolivia, a country which does not have the death penalty, and since indigenous leaders repeatedly state that community justice does not include the death penalty, it is unclear what good a governmental decree will do in the face of uncontrolled mob violence.

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Comment
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¶8. (C) The personal backgrounds of central government leadership may also be contributing to a sense of lawlessness in Bolivia. President Evo Morales is known as the most successful street protester in Bolivian history (once laying siege to the capital for 40 days), and recent events at the Constituent Assembly and Congress have shown that he and the MAS remain willing to use street power. The fact that Evo is still head of the cocaleros, a group willing to take Evo's orders and mount sometimes-violent protests, adds to a sense of confrontation as an extension of politics. Vice President Garcia Linera's terrorist background has also been visible since his rise to national power, particularly when he has on multiple occasions exhorted Red Poncho militia groups to armed confrontation. The us-against-them rhetoric of the MAS, labeling opposition groups (or even former friends) as "traitors", "racists", and "oligarchs" is increasing intra-Bolivian tension. Crowds feel empowered as they mistake lynchings for community justice, which the MAS constitution calls for but does not define. At a time when departments are seeking more autonomy and Evo is trying to consolidate his power (while declaring that he will only leave the Palace dead), the possibility for confrontations and violence is worsening. End comment.

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